DAWN

OPINION

American 'armada'

ALTHOUGH it seemed that US President Donald Trump had reconsidered his plans to stage an attack on Iran last week, an American military build-up in the region points to the fact that the danger of a conflagration has yet to pass. Mr Trump has said that an "armada" of American ships is headed to the Gulf "just in case", while adding that he did not want to "see anything happen" vis- -vis Iran. There are also reports that the US has deployed more fighter jets to its bases in some regional states, while the Turkish foreign minister has said that Israel is "looking for an opportunity" to strike Iran. Senior Iranian officials, on the other hand, have indicated they will hit back hard if attacked.

The Trumpian threats could well be mere sabre-rattling designed to bring Tehran to the table on America's terms. However, the problem with such brinkmanship is that it can very quickly spiral out of control, and have devastating real-world consequences. It is also a fact that the US, Israel and many of their Western allies keep shifting the goalposts where Iran is concerned. At times they claim to be acting out of sympathy for the Iranian people and the alleged mistreatment they suffer at the hands of their rulers. But this sympathy is nowhere to be seen when the US and Israel lob missiles at Iran, killing innocent civilians. At other times they have issues with Iran's nuclear programme, its stockpile of missiles, and its support for 'proxies' such as Hezbollah, Hamas etc. The ultimate aim of the US-led bloc, though, seems to be to punish and bring down a regime that has been a geopolitical adversary for nearly five decades.

Assuming that Mr Trump is not bluffing, and his plans to attack Iran are still on the table, those states, including Pakistan and Turkiye, that have joined his Board of Peace need to talk him out of this disastrous plan. Mr Trump fashions himself a peacemaker, yet his conduct against Venezuela and Iran is that of a warmonger. There is also some media commentary that the US president backed off from an attack on Iran in mid-January not out of any humanitarian compulsions, but because the US and its allies were then not militarily and logistically prepared for aggression against Tehran. The latest military build-up may be to rectify that situation. Saner minds in the world community that have Mr Trump's ear must insist that plans for a Zionist-neocon war against Iran must be jettisoned. If the US and other Western states are serious about resolving their differences with Iran, they must treat it with respect, and refrain from violating its sovereignty. Above all, no one can afford a disastrous new war.

No dissent

IT will be remembered as another low point in the history of Pakistan's justice system. An Islamabad lawyer couple, often seen standing beside citizens challenging human rights violations, has been condemned by a sessions court to serve time for statements deemed too controversial to be posted on social media platform X. Imaan Zainab-Mazari and her husband, Hadi Ali Chattha, are both promising human rights lawyers and activists known for fighting high-profile cases involving enforced disappearances, blasphemy accusations, and judicial independence. They have often pleaded in court on behalf of citizens with no means to pay for legal counsel or the privilege to navigate a broken justice system on their own. Many believe their insistence on representing victims of state excesses, outspokenness on issues like free speech and rule of law, and criticism of state institutions are what prompted the recent witch-hunt against them. In the past few weeks, the two found themselves in the crosshairs of an unrelenting campaign of lawfare, which included a previously undisclosed case that 'magically' resurfaced when their detention was sought. The ordeal culminated in a dramatic arrest on Jan 23, followed by a conviction the very next day.

The National Cyber Crime Investigation Authority, the complainant in this case, had accused Ms Mazari last July of "disseminating and propagating narratives that align with hostile terrorist groups and proscribed organisations". Her husband was deemed complicit for reposting those posts. A court order authored by Additional District and Sessions Judge Muhammad Afzal Majoka now holds the two guilty of 'glorification of an offence', 'cyberterrorism' and 'false and fake information'. Their punishment: rigorous imprisonment for five years and a fine of Rs5m each for the first charge; 10 years and Rs30m each for the second; and two years and Rs1m each for the third. One does not need the content of the offending tweets to guess what they likely said, just as one does not need legal reasoning to understand this verdict. Our legal community has historically played a central role in resisting despotism and defending constitutional norms. This conviction raises the question of whether that tradition is being deliberately weakened through harsh punishment. If such convictions stand, the message to lawyers, journalists and citizens alike is unmistakable: dissent will not merely be discouraged, it will be criminalised.

Winter misery

PAKISTAN'S underprivileged are perennially left out in the cold. As mercury dives to single digits, the government's refusal to treat the biting cold as a climate emergency is claiming lives. In Chitral, at least nine members of a family were killed when an avalanche consumed their house. Intense snowfall and landslides have crippled routine life in KP, Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Azad Kashmir. Households grapple with unannounced power and gas cuts; commuters contend with blocked roads and highways. Power outages, suspended water supply, and extremely low gas pressure turned homes into dark freezers in Balochistan where temperatures were as low as minus 13°C. This month, nearly 50 people have reportedly died of the cold in Karachi alone — a city that usually experiences mild winters witnessed temperatures below 7°C. This weather system is expected to bring more rain and snowfall to the country but only Punjab seems prepared for it.

Cold snaps often take an unsparing toll on the human body. Medical experts say that as the cold forces the heart to work overtime, heart attacks, strokes, and kidney complications become more common, particularly among people suffering from heart disease, poor immunity and diabetes. Heat loss in the body causes chilblains, frostbite and hypothermia — treatable conditions that turn lethal due to the lack of knowledge about them. A warm hearth in winter can help. But the scores that languish on cold, hard footpaths wrapped in rags or plastic die uncounted. Welfare-centric policies and mechanisms that ensure uninterrupted gas and electricity and road safety in extreme weather events are crucial. The state's inability to expand free shelter and meal programmes, such as *panahgahs*, must be tackled with the adoption of international models involving pavement shelters and drop-in facilities. For immediate relief, parts of public spaces should serve as refuge. The antidote to widespread indignity is compassion.

BY MUHAMMAD AMIR RANA

Staying relevant

If Pakistan had a strong economy and stable systems, would it make the same choices?

PAKISTAN has officially joined the Trump-led Board of Peace (BoP), aimed at ending the conflict in Gaza. This decision reflects Pakistan's usual realpolitik approach to the Middle East. However, in Pakistan, realpolitik is often seen as a national weakness.

Since the Kuwait invasion, the US invasion of Iraq, the deployment of forces in Yemen, and most recently, attempts to stop the Israel-Palestine conflict, Pakistan has chosen a pragmatic foreign policy. These decisions are justified by geo-economic needs and the desire to stay relevant in the West and Middle East. The key question is: if Pakistan had a strong economy and stable political and social systems, would it make the same choices?

This question is significant because, in such instances, the establishment often makes decisions that contradict prevailing public sentiments, sentiments shaped by opinion-makers and religious clergy who promote a moral narrative anchored in a narrow worldview. In contrast, the establishment tends to adopt a more grounded, interest-based approach.

Pragmatism exacts a price. Those who advocate a moral-politics narrative continue to delegitimise political and military decision-makers, widening the gap between public opinion and state policy. It is worth examining whether a stronger economy and greater political stability would compel Pakistan's leadership to weigh public sentiment more heavily, or whether strategic interests would still dominate policy choices.

Most countries that have joined Trump's BoP so far tend to have weak democratic credentials and are predominantly Muslim states that do not prioritise public opinion in foreign policy; their ruling elites often hold worldviews distinct from those of their populations. In contrast, democracies with some degree of pluralism, such as Indonesia or Turkiye, may consider public sentiment more directly, yet ultimately align their decisions with international norms and their political and strategic interests.

Pakistan's hybrid political system behaves at times like a quasi-monarchy, with critical foreign policy decisions taken outside a broad parliamentary consensus. This dynamic harms the credibility of ruling elites and enables the clergy to reinforce the narrative that the country's leadership is a 'puppet of Western imperialism', asserting that under a truly Islamic system, the decisions would be different. The establishment does not like such equations and continues struggling to produce a counter-narrative.

It is understandable why building consensus on sensitive issues, such as joining President Donald Trump's BoP or participating in a stabilisation force in Gaza, is difficult in parliament; only a few brave legislators are willing to counter dominant popular perceptions. Political elites also prefer that the establishment manage consensus-building in such affairs, an expectation the institution is not equipped to meet without paying a domestic legitimacy cost.

No doubt, public opinion is not very supportive of joining the BoP, but the situation in the country this time is different. Those who traditionally exploit such sentiments lack the strength to mobilise the masses or bring them into the streets. The Friday protests called by religious parties, and the occasional large demonstrations organised by the Jamaat-i-Islami, JUI-F, or a Shia party, may provide a degree of catharsis for public sentiment, but they are unlikely to generate sustained momentum. Nor are they capable of creating the kind of impression that would worry Pakistan's partners in the Gulf or the US.

Apart from the decision to join the BoP, which is justified from several regional and global perspectives, the hybrid regime has weakened the street power of political and religious parties, setting examples through its handling of the PTI and TLP. Although the two cases are not directly comparable — the PTI's mass protests were rooted in demands for political rights, while TLP was promoting an extremist agenda — the state security institutions dealt with both through a fully muscular approach. As a result, the TLP is now in complete disarray, while the PTI is struggling to mobilise the masses, mainly in Punjab and the federal capital.

This approach reflects the mentality of a hybrid regime that seeks to shape Pakistan into a more authoritarian state. The message is clear for all domestic actors. However, the durability of this model remains uncertain. Much depends on whether this approach can deliver economic improvements, ease public hardship and enhance economic indicators, a challenge that remains considerable.

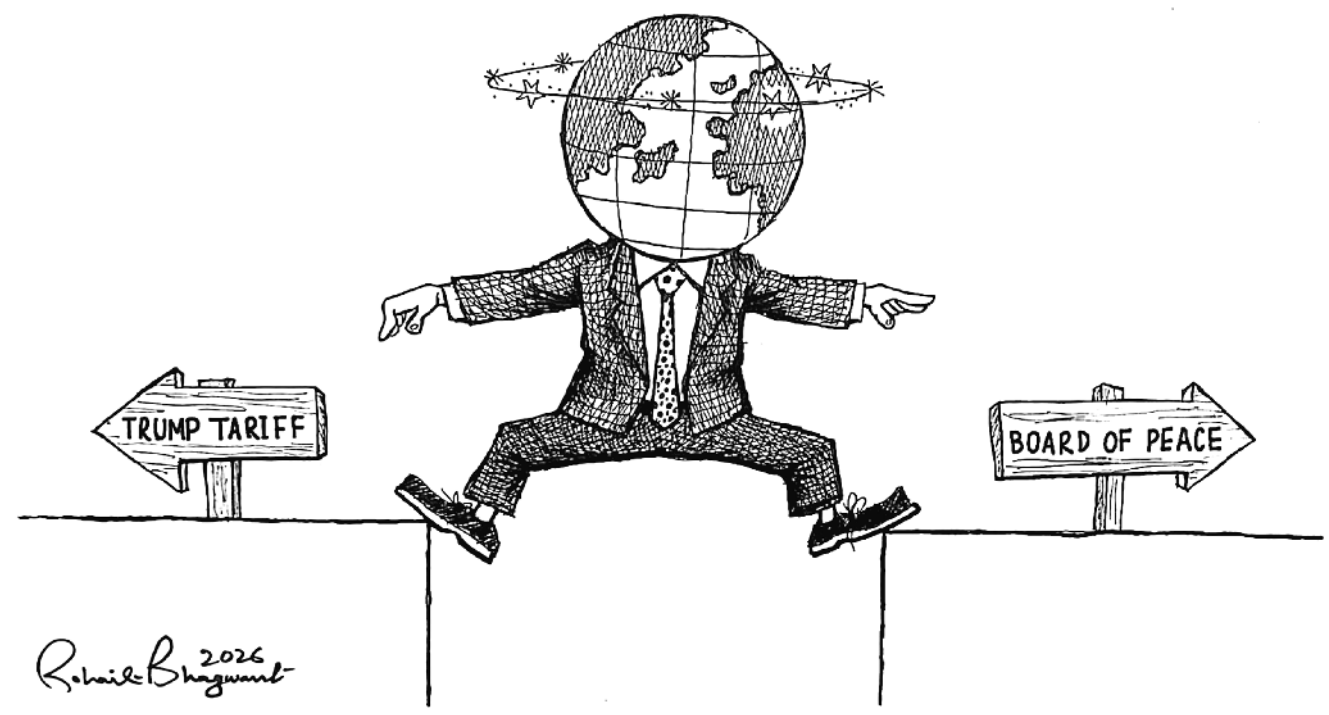
The realpolitik behind joining the BoP is evident; Pakistan seeks to remain relevant in regional affairs while enhancing defence and economic cooperation with Gulf and African nations. Another angle is that Pakistan has effectively joined the club of Trump's allies, while India is in the opposite camp, deepening economic and defence collaboration with the EU and its member states, many of which have been at odds with Trump's policies recently. In this context, Pakistan had limited options to remain neutral.

Although association with Trump may not be popular in domestic or international public opinion, it has provided the architects and operators of the hybrid regime with an opportunity to gain legitimacy and consolidate their control over the political system, something they have sought for decades.

As for the argument that Pakistan should not have joined the BoP because it is a parallel structure to the UN, this reasoning is flawed. The international body has long struggled to provide an effective dispute-resolution mechanism. Who knows this better than Pakistan, given what happened to its Kashmir resolutions in the Security Council? The UN has a history of siding with the powerful and with those on whom it depends on for funding. Whatever Trump wants, he can achieve through the UN as well; after all, it was the UNSC that first passed Resolution 2803, which effectively endorsed Trump's peace plan for Gaza.

If viewed closely, President Trump and the architects of Pakistan's hybrid regime share a similar worldview; the only difference is that Trump has an entire world to play with. ■

The writer is a security analyst.



BY ABBAS NASIR

The least bad option

WARY of US President Donald Trump's temperament, narcissism, shifting moods and ever-evolving agenda, the eight Muslim nations that signed the joining document of the so-called Board of Peace framed their decision intelligently, affixing it to the context of peace, rehabilitation of the Israeli-battered Gaza Strip and the question of a pathway to Palestinian statehood in line with UN resolutions.

The Pakistani parliamentary opposition makes a valid case that the matter should have been laid before the House for discussion and approval prior to any decision; but its view that joining the Board was not a prudent move is open to question. "It was the least worst [bad] option," was the crisp comment of former ambassador Imran Ali Chaudhry, who had recently retired when the digital platform Naya Daur sought his opinion. There are a number of reasons why I tend to agree with him.

People around the world have been up in arms at the apartheid State of Israel's genocide in Gaza starting after the Hamas attack of Oct 7, 2023. Calls from around the world fell on deaf ears as the West, led by the US, unconditionally supported, armed and facilitated the Zionist state's assault on the Strip. Some 70,000 Gaza Palestinians were slaughtered, including about 20,000 children and a large number of women, elderly and the infirm, ie, non-combatants. But it remained business as usual as far as the genocidal apartheid state was concerned.

Whether in the hope of winning laurels or heeding his Gulf friends' counsel, it was Trump who finally stopped the genocide. At the beginning, he was talking in terms of relocating the Gaza population and developing the Strip as the Middle East's Riviera. Then, possibly the continuing street protests in the West, the US included, and the constant unhappiness of his well-resourced Gulf friends made him stay his hand and he made clear his plan did not envisage or include anyone being displaced from Gaza.

His announcements thus far have fallen way short of suggesting any pathway to Palestinian statehood. This is a major negative. Especially at a time when the apartheid state has accelerated evictions of Palestinians and the expansion of settlements in the West Bank.

But, despite some 450 murders of Gaza Palestinians since last October's ceasefire by Israel, the mass killing that continued unabated for two years and claimed at the very least 70,000 lives has stopped. If joining the Board means that the magnitude of killing has stopped and many more lives saved, then perhaps it is worth it.

Pakistan has wisely sought safety in numbers and has joined the Board as part of an OIC bloc. This makes it easier in relative terms to have its voice heard. Perhaps, collectively, they can counter and dilute the apartheid state's influence with Trump. And if the going gets too frustrating, then they can exit en bloc without one state having to face the seemingly unstable US leader's wrath.

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Let's not forget, the US is Pakistan's largest export market valued at between $5 billion and $6bn a year. Pakistan is also currently in an IMF programme — an institution with huge American influence, which has brought in badly needed foreign exchange injections. Coupled with meeting some of Pakistan's military spares/upgrade needs such as the $640 million upgrade of PAF F-16 aircraft which extends their operational age to 2040, all these factors make Pakistan's decision understandable.

In addition, Pakistan military's performance during last May's clash with India seems to have boosted the country's standing in the region as well, with Trump constantly endorsing the PAF's verified kill claims against its arch-rival, the IAF.

This element, along with effective diplomacy by the hybrid leadership, has opened up opportunities. While I wouldn't go as far as to repeat what some analysts are saying about Pakistan being now the net security provider in the region, the defence pact with Saudi Arabia is a significant milestone.

The one interesting fact about this Board is that apart from the US, not a single UN Security Council member has joined it. Russia, China, Britain and France have so far not joined and don't appear to be doing so either. The impact of this will become clear over time.

Many pragmatic decisions taken to safeguard the national interest may not pass the principled position test. My first and foremost concern is that the issues affecting the lives of the Palestinians in Gaza, and then the West Bank, are to be decided by an apex body that does not have a single Palestinian on it.

It will be left to other Muslim states' representatives to carry the Palestinian mantle. Their past record of standing up for the rights of the Palestinians is not very inspiring, but the Gaza genocide seems to have shaken the most docile into sitting up and saying enough is enough. Let's hope this isn't wishful thinking.

As much as I want to, I don't see this Board, with chairman Trump armed with the solitary veto and a large number of committed Zionist supporters of the apartheid state including Benjamin Netanyahu himself on it, making progress on Palestinian statehood.

But if it stops the genocide, and leads to some relief for the Gaza population and sets things on the path to reconstruction and rehabilitation it will be worthwhile. This is how powerless we are to see justice prevail in the world.

Since this Board is unlikely to last a day after Trump's term ends, one can safely say it may not achieve much more except give the US leader another opportunity to blow his own trumpet and make largely unfounded claims of success and impact.

For Pakistan coming out unscathed at the end and more tightly aligned with Saudi Arabia, Turkiye, Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, Qatar and Indonesia would be a diplomatic and strategic win, particularly because the nation's perennial ally China is reportedly fine with the decision. ■

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